

## **Research Talking Points**

### **High School Reform**

The California Teachers Association recently commissioned WestEd, a well-respected independent research and development center (June 2005) to produce a review of national and state trends in high school reform. Here's what the research shows.

- There seems to be no shortage to the range and quantity of high school reform efforts, but to date there is little large scale empirical evidence about the effectiveness of any given model or approach. This is understandable because high schools are large, complex organizations.
- There are several key issues that pop up in report after report on high school re-design – these issues are challenges that must be addressed by any high school re-design effort and include the need to effectively address:
  - The transition from middle school to high school;
  - Literacy and reading;
  - English Language Learners (ELLs);
  - High school dropouts;
  - Violence;
  - Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs;
  - Transition from high school to a postsecondary setting.
- The literature on high performing high schools shows that these schools share a particular set of characteristics that are remarkably consistent. These include:
  - A high set of expectations and rigorous curriculum;
  - A variety of instructional strategies that engage students in real-world applications;
  - Strong connections between staff and students;
  - Mission-driven leadership and school culture;
  - A professional community of faculty and staff that focuses on teaching and learning, as well as closing the achievement gaps; and,
  - Additional supports for students who need them.
- The research also suggests that high school reform/redesign faces several potential impediments that can and should be addressed by those who propose it. These include the fact that:
  - High school is a time-honored cultural reference point in many communities who are reluctant to see it change;
  - Reform fatigue is setting in among educators who have been caught in a revolving door of school redesign and “improvement” efforts.
  - Adequate funding is required to develop new programs, teacher skills and student supports – in addition, that funding needs to be sustainable for the amount of time required for such reforms to take hold.

Denise McKeon, August 2005  
NEA Research